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Diary and Reflections from My Trip to Cuba
December 26, 2010 to January 2, 2011

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Written as experienced. Brackets indicate text was written some time later. Please forgive mistakes and misunderstandings; I try to express what I learned and felt.

Nine people on the tour: me (Econ prof), Jennifer (graphics/web design at Marquette), Dawn (teaching consultant) and Eric (district school administrator), Josh and Leigh (teachers), Sue (special needs teacher), Alissa (teacher), and Joan (teacher). Since I don't know who might read this, I'm not going to identify Cubans that I met—just in case.

December 26, 2010, 8:30am

I was born in Camagüey, Cuba, in 1960 and I left in 1962. I grew up in Miami and live in Indiana.

I'm on a train from West Palm Beach to Miami International Airport. It's a nice ride on a pretty day. I constantly question my decision to do this, but I like challenges and doing something out of the ordinary. I don't know what I'll find in Cuba. Will it simply be another poor country like Honduras or the DR or will it be different?



11:00am

Check in was a trip. It turns out my flight is actually a charter. Many people take bags stuffed with food, medicine, and consumer goods. They wrap the bags with plastic wrap to prevent theft at the airport in Havana. I did not wrap my suitcase. I spoke with a guy who was going back for the second time. He said the deterioration and lack of maintenance is amazing.



6:00pm

I'm at the Habana Libre (aka Havana Hilton). My room is very nice, if a bit dated. The airport was a bit dicey. They were not happy to see the netbook (and it took me a while to convince them it was a computer because it is so small). The head guy came over to fill out various papers (and I do mean *paper* records). They *really* want me to take it back out of here—which I hope to. For a while there, he was making noise about paying \$500CUC to bring it in. In the end, it all worked out.

I was a bit emotional on touchdown. It felt weird. I paused when my feet hit the ground. After the customs hassle, I exchanged money and got a taxi. The driver had his own taxi a few years ago when they made that legal, but then they took his ownership away so now the old Hyundai he was driving is rented from the government. He knew of Aroldis Chapman (a recent defector who pitches for the Reds), but not through newspapers.

My initial impression is that there was serious wealth here at some point. The buildings are just really worn, but you can tell that they were something substantial. It is much, much cleaner than Honduras or the DR.

They just started blasting music outside the hotel. I have the window open because the breeze is wonderful and the view from my room on the 16th floor is amazing. The hotel is the tallest building in Havana and you can see many buildings far west where my room looks out and water north and east. It was overcast and cool (66) on arrival.



I got excited for a second because my computer picked up a new network called hha so I thought it might be this hotel. Unfortunately it's not. I did learn, however, that I can get a connection for 25CUC/night! It's Ethernet and the guy comes to your room to hook it up. I'm guessing if I had a cable I could do this, but I don't.

TV reception is a surprise—ESPN, HBO, and such. We'll see how the typical Cuban lives because I got a call from a cousin and I'm going to her house Monday night.

December 27, 2010, 9am

My tour guide called last night. When she heard I was born here, she started to say something like, "We're comrades," but then mumbled something else. It was very diplomatic of her. She seems punctual and organized.

[Looking back, I'm sure she was as nervous about me, a Miami Cuban, as I was of her.]

I went to dinner at the “tipico” Cuban-food restaurant (they have a couple of others) in the hotel. I wanted the printed menu as a memento, but the waiter said they just printed them and he couldn’t give me one. I thought that he could have been more obliging.

This hotel is part of a Sol Melia chain. It is quite odd. I think the elevators take so long because they don’t all work. The décor in the hallways is from the 1950s. [In fact, later I learned that it was built by Hilton in 1956, so it was pretty new when Castro took over. I wouldn’t be surprised if the carpet in the hallways was original. There are three seasons, with a high price of 180CUC and a low of 86CUC. A new hotel on 17 and Paseo, 31CUC for a single and 46CUC for a double, would be a great place for students.]

Breakfast on the 20th floor featured a breathtaking view.



I walked out to change money and bought a paper. The guy beamed when he realized I was Cuban. I asked him how much and he said, “Whatever you want to give me.” I had a few coins so I gave them to him. [It turns out that I way overpaid him.]

I thought I would be able to use a credit card at the bank, but when I handed her my US passport, forget it. It was 116CUC/\$1 until I was a US citizen and then it was 80/1. Wow. Notable things that are missing are traffic and ads. I haven’t noticed many churches either. I need to keep looking carefully and not just see what’s on the surface.

11:30pm

This was a really full day. We got on a bus and went to La Maqueta de La Habana, a scale model of the city. On the way, our guide gave her version of Cuban history. I stayed mostly quiet although I would have said some things differently and I wanted to add other things. We heard a nice presentation on the history of Havana. The model had colors to indicate the stages in which the city was built. Rust for colonial Spain, yellow for 1900 to 1960 (when most of the city was built), white for after the Revolution, and ivory for planned developments. The British invaded from land in 1762, and then traded Havana for Florida a few years later. The talk was spiced with a few political points about how food and housing are rights, not commodities, but it was informative. The Mafia (e.g., Meyer Lansky) built the hotels and when Fidel won, the people threw the casino equipment into the streets and burned it. They also destroyed the parking meters (which are still gone).



Habana
Libre
Hotel

We went to Casa de la Amistad for lunch. It's a mansion built in 1926 and the story of a love affair. I didn't like the speaker. He seemed somehow fake to me, but it was probably my fault. He had some kind of electric gadget he was showing me that had a dictionary on it. Whatever—if it had web access I would have been impressed. The food was really good. Fish, rice, and a hash brown patty (an odd combination). The mojito was very good.

[There are still many old cars on the street, but I was struck by the many newer ones, especially west of Havana.]



The Capitolio Nacional is a replica of the US Capitol building, except it is taller. It was built at great expense during the 1930s (I think). We did not go inside and I'm not sure what it is used for today.



We then walked Old Havana. It was nice, but tiring and we didn't really get to stop. I wanted to browse the books, but our guide said we could do that later on our own time, which we never really had.

[The Cuban bookseller below thought it was really cold! It was certainly above 50⁰ F.]



[Below are photos of Plaza Vieja, Plaza de la Catedral, and the cathedral.]





We made an unscheduled stop at a school. I initially thought that we got a serious dose of propaganda at this school, but I'm not so sure now. I'm not sure if this was a typical school, but it was the only school we actually saw so it's hard to know. It had computers (quite dated). There were students who had just performed in some kind of musical event, but we did not get to talk to them.

All private education has been wiped out. [The guide at the cemetery told me it is illegal to even tutor someone.] There were pictures of Fidel and Marti in the classroom. There are slogans everywhere and it's very clear that education is mixed with politics. I would not like this education for my children any more than I liked Just Say No.

[The school was founded by the "mother of Cuban education," but I don't remember her name. Her bust, along with Martí, is in the entrance.]



[Now at the end of the trip, it does strike me as very odd (as someone pointed out in our evaluation of the tour on the last day) that for a teacher's education tour, we only saw one school and the medical school. The UHavana was closed and the other schools were, understandably, on vacation. I am not confident that I know anything about education in Cuba. I wanted to ask if Cuba participates in international testing and, if so, how they do compared to other countries, but I figured this would be yet another "quantitative" question that would not be answered.

It looks like the short answer is that Cuba does exceptionally well in educating its children, certainly compared to other Latin American countries, ranking 1st in a recent TIMSS 7th and 8th grade math test. I ordered this book from Amazon:
<http://www.amazon.com/Cubas-Academic-Advantage-Students-Better/dp/0804755981>

It's the same as health, by providing broad, basic education, Cuba's average is higher than the average in richer, but more unequal societies. So, I now conclude that the school we saw was typical and our tour failed to really push a true Cuban success story. That is odd.]

I then went to visit my cousin and her family. Her son, 7 or 8 years old, was in a hoodie under a blanket watching a small TV in the tiny living room. There is a small kitchen, a bathroom, and two bedrooms. It was dark and cramped. They were really nice and the food was good. She is a prosecutor and her husband works at a smokehouse that pays worse than his previous job as head of security at a hospital, but he gets to bring home food. That is huge. I had smoked pork chops and chicken with moros. Yummy.

My cousin told me about a book recently published about Operation Peter Pan. It is very negative and my uncle Rafael (a priest) figures prominently in it because he was instrumental in getting children out of Cuba. She said she would try to find it. I asked around and could not find it. Let's see if Amazon has it.

[Yes, Operacion Pedro Pan by Yvonne Conde is available at Amazon.com. There is an English language version, along with audio and ebook formats. Gotta love the Internet.]

Things I did not know: you don't get in trouble if you sign up to try to leave; you can't leave to the US because of the US, not Cuba (not sure about emigrating to other countries); you do have some voice in government even if you don't belong to the party; lots of people belong to the Communist Party, not 5% like I thought, but way more than half according to my cousin; Raul is Prez because he is VP, not because Fidel handed it to him; there is an old guard that does not want reform, but many Cubans do. The process of lineamientos (realigning) continues in January. This could lead to substantial reform.

Things I knew: Fidel being there for 50 years is a winning argument for change; not allowing supply and demand to work is really bad; not allowing firms to go bankrupt is really bad; not having any way to punish mistakes is really bad (my cousin-in-law's factory needed slicing equipment but they were given the wrong kind—nothing happened as a result); not being free to speak is really bad (if you yell "Fidel sucks" once nothing happens, the second time they would arrest you); the embargo will come down when the Castros die—there is too much to gain from various sides.

It was a great conversation and my cousin-in-law then took me home on a bus and we walked around the Malecon (it was cold). They gave me old kinds of money and rum. I gave them 20 CUCs. They didn't want it, but I felt guilty that I didn't bring anything. So, it's like this: 24 Cuban pesos = 1 CUC. The CUC started when Cubans were fed up with not having dollars. They had to wait for relatives to bring dollars. Our guide said it was in 2003 (and blamed Bush for restricting dollar availability). Workers get paid ridiculously low salaries (like 300 to 800 pesos a month), but housing is free (so is education and medical care) and a list of basic food items (from the libreta) is hugely subsidized. You can buy more if you need it, but it is expensive for Cubans earning pesos because of the 24 peso to CUC exchange rate. (I wonder if anyone has done a CPI?) Moving to Havana is brutal—se permuta—you have to trade a house for someone else's house and they have to be of roughly equal value.

[At the end of the trip, I asked someone how much a professor at UHavana makes and she said maybe 900 or 1000 pesos. At 24/1, that's a little over \$40/month. I bet a taxi driver could make that in a week.]

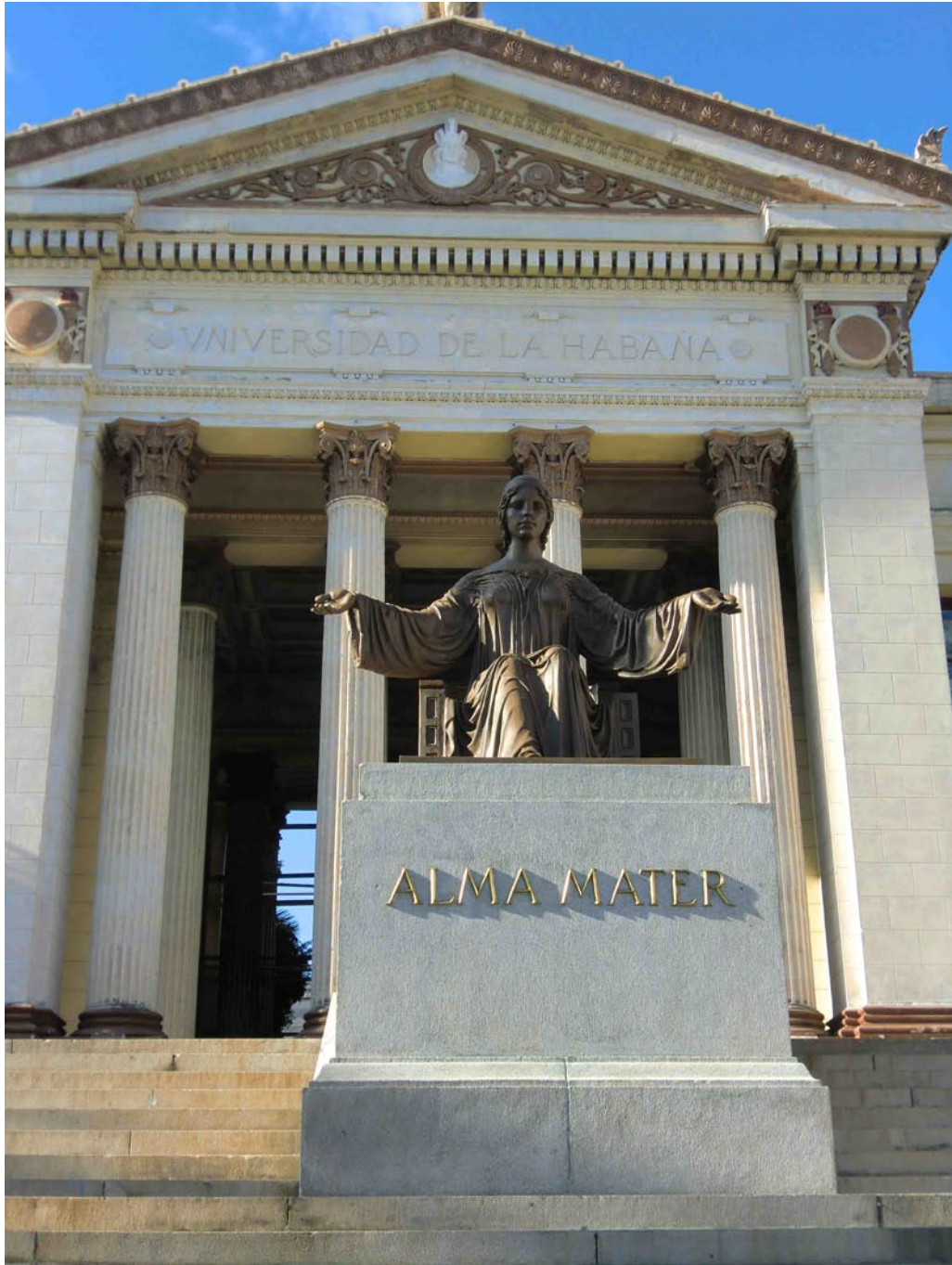
December 28, 2010, 6pm

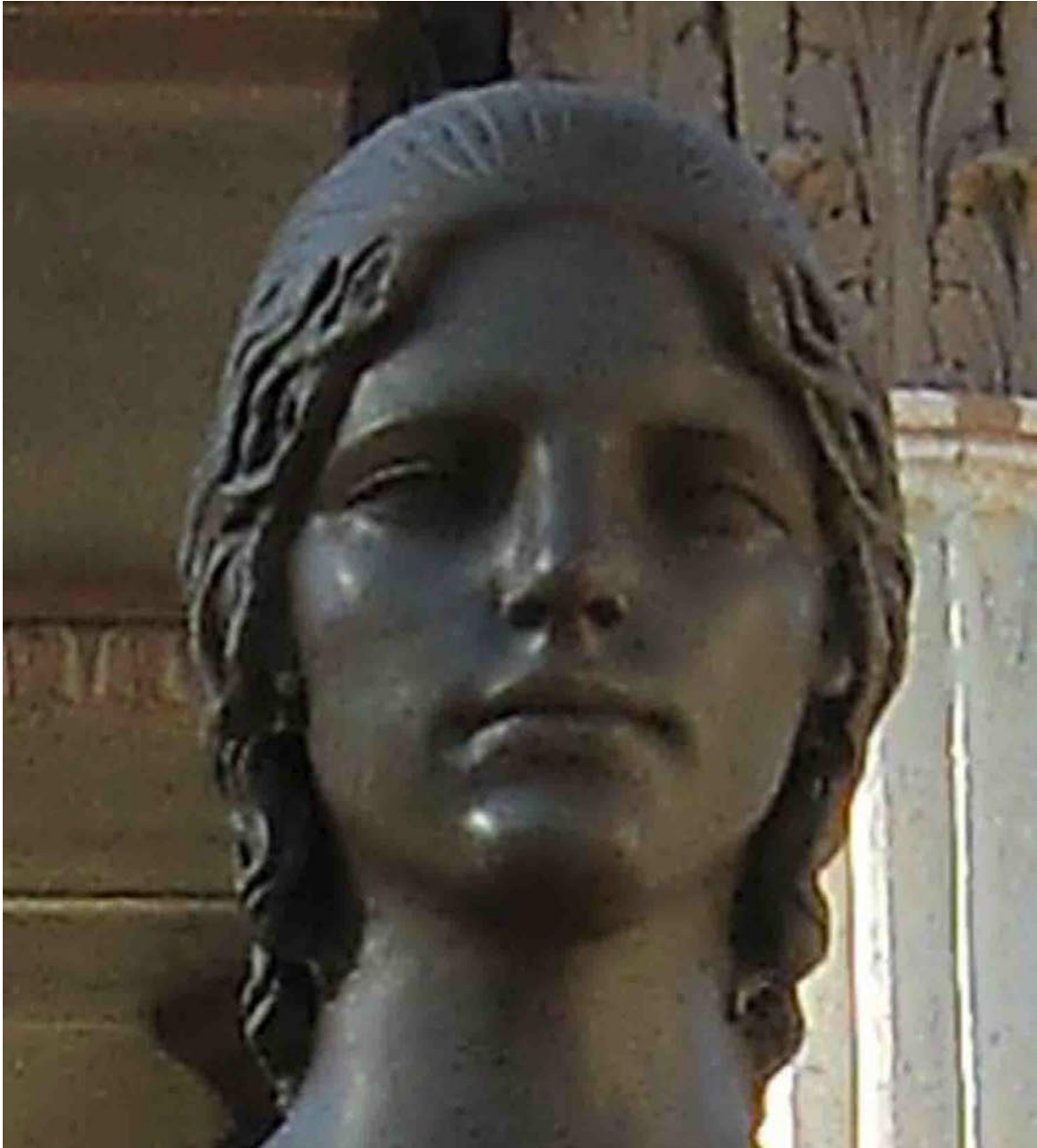
Our host this morning at the University of Havana was wonderful. He is a warm, old guy who described himself as a historian of the University. We met at the steps of the Alma Mater and he spoke for an hour. He explained how the buildings at the present site were funded with American money from Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1910s. The donors were racist (he said they belonged to the KKK, but I'm pretty sure that didn't start in the US until the 1920s) and they put an owl with blue eyes on the top of the main building.



[Wikipedia says there was a first wave of KKK in the 1860s, so maybe the professor was right.]

The racist donors wanted the school to be only for whites. The Alma Mater statue was modeled after a beautiful mulatto woman, but the Americans took the head off and replaced it with a white woman's features. So, now you're part of the few who know that the body is still of the original model and the face is that of an unknown white American woman.





The professor was a friend of Fidel's in school (from elementary through the study of law), but said he was not a communist. He described Fidel as brilliant. At the end, he gave Joan (as leader of the delegation) a medal (like one he had given to Jimmy Carter and Jose Saramago) and she promised to put it on a ship that goes around the world.

I finally figured out what he said to me as I introduced myself and told him I was from Camagüey after his talk. He was surprised that I spoke Spanish and was scared and said I had tricked him by pretending to not speak Spanish. I said there was no problem, but he was agitated and he said, "What if I was to say that Huber Matos was a hero?" I said that would be fine and he could say or think whatever he wanted. He gave me a big hug. It

was an emotional moment and the look of relief on his face spoke volumes about the repression he has dealt with all of these years. FYI, Huber Matos was from Camagüey and with Fidel early on, but turned against him after Fidel announced he was a communist.

The professor has made a life here without being a communist, just like all of the Escalas from my mom's side of the family. It is puzzling: our guide's husband is communist and she is not; her father is and her mother is not; My cousin-in-law is and my cousin is not. There does not appear to be friction over this. I don't think that there are communist spies on each block who rat out dissidents and have them hauled away—unless, of course, you started to seriously challenge the government. That would not be allowed. As Fidel famously said, “Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing.”

Next was the low spot of the trip for me. A woman explained how wonderful things are here and droned on about the injustice of the Cuban Five. She gave everyone a book, but I leafed through it and it was goofy propaganda to the max. I left it on my chair. On the bus ride afterwards, I explained to our guide that the Internet is needed so people can get both sides of the story. She said, “We get the truth.” I said, “Both sides.” We did this a couple of times until she finally realized what I was trying to say. She said in a hushed voice, “Humberto, remember, we have censorship here.”

[At the end of the trip, Leigh said that she liked this presentation because it was so openly propagandist that it was funny. Interesting take. I sat there and scowled and rolled my eyes during it. Maybe accepting it as humorous is a better approach. That would work as a visitor, but I kept imagining a life here. It is difficult to measure the cost of intellectual repression. I'm thinking of the professor again.]

Our next stop, the Museum of Literacy was not great for me, although the others seemed to really like it. The speaker said Cuba had 25% illiteracy in 1961 when Fidel gave the command to eliminate illiteracy. 100,000 students, mostly aged 13 to 16, but the youngest 9, went to rural areas to teach peasants how to read and write (as shown below).



In a year, everyone was literate and victory was announced. I kept thinking that can't be right. She even said they currently have a small illiteracy rate, which is the best in Latin America. Maybe so, but it's not zero. Turns out declaring victory is not the same as actual victory (insert here an image of Bush on a carrier with a giant "Mission Accomplished" banner behind him). She never explained why some people didn't like the campaign (one of the first teachers was shot), I mean, who wouldn't like to teach everyone to read and write? I realized that there was more going on than just literacy. There was political indoctrination of both teachers and students. She read examples of letters of thanks for being taught to read and write addressed to Fidel. The letters are all bound and there are tons of them archived in the museum. Then there was a long discussion of Si, se puede, a reading program used in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua that was supposedly used to wipe out illiteracy there. It was being used in Honduras until the coup d'etat, she said. (I later explained to a few folks in the group who didn't know about Honduras that it was actually a complicated constitutional crisis triggered by Zelaya's attempt to run again even though they have term limits—what a mess, but in my opinion, not a coup, though I grant that the military kidnapping him and shipping him out of the country was ridiculous. Why couldn't they just arrest him?) She claimed the literacy methodology was a silver bullet that Fidel invented (!) relying on an ingenious method of tying letters to numbers. I don't think I contained my amusement well (I chuckled for sure, but I don't know how loud), but I said nothing.

Lunch at El Aljibe. Chicken with secret sauce that reminded me of the Dominican Republic's pollo wasakaka. I told our guide that Julian Assange could get the secret sauce and she had heard of him. So had our driver. He asked if Assange was still in jail. I thought that was interesting that they have access to such information. The food was pretty good. Our driver also told me that he left being a teacher in 1993 because the pay was too low. As a tour bus driver, he makes a little less salary, but gets 10CUC and tips. He has to fix the truck himself and showed me his dirty nails. He does not get paid if the truck isn't working.

We went to the house of Jose Fuster, a ceramic artist. He has covered his house and most of the neighborhood with ceramic tile. It's pretty crazy.



This far western part of Havana was nice and there are a few fancy hotels out there. It's some kind of business district. I saw a brand new Subaru backing out of a big house with an electric gate. Alissa said it reminded her of Guatemala. The drive back along the Malecon was scenic.

We went to a craft/art market for an hour. I wanted to buy a print, but (surprise for anyone reading this who doesn't know me) I couldn't agree on a price—he wouldn't go below 20CUC and I wanted it at 15CUC so I didn't get it. I am an idiot. It was a panoramic view of the Malecon. He claimed he would need special permission to sell it at 15CUC—could that be true? Whether it is or not, I wish had the print.

Off to dinner at Monguito's with a couple of people from the tour at 7pm. I tried to get Internet for 10CUC for an hour at the hotel, but the line was too long.

Things I didn't know: Cubans are really scared of Cubans in Miami; I haven't seen anyone starving here—there is food and it's pretty good (although my cousin says Manzanillo and the eastern part of the island is much poorer); the news blackout is not as great as I thought; Cubans spend a lot of time sitting around doing nothing. You “work” at whatever you do, but you do not work hard. Nothing is your responsibility really. The lady at the business center of the hotel couldn't really care less if I got or did not get on the web.

Things I still don't know: is the lack of Internet access Cuba's or the US's fault?

[A cursory web search seems to cast most of the blame on the repressive Cuban government, although the US embargo also plays a role. I am more sure than ever that the US should lift its restrictions. The Cuban government uses the embargo as evidence of evil American intent and as an excuse for why the economy underperforms. Remove it and let's see what happens.]

December 30, 2010, 6:30pm

[I haven't had a chance to write for two days. So this is catching up time.]

So Tuesday night's dinner at Monguito's was pretty good and cheap. 6CUCs for a pork fricassee that I split with Jennifer and it was still plenty. Flan was good. I had heard portions were very small. That's a bunch of baloney. We then walked to the Malecon and to the Hotel Nacional. It was really pretty and relatively cheap (160/night). We paused to look at the ocean and we did not realize we were in front of the US Interests Section. A guard waved at us to move on, even though we were across the very wide street. I couldn't tell if it was a Cuban or US guard. The Cubans put up a huge Venceremos sign across from the US Interests Section and there was a giant sheet to block the ticker tape that Bush put on top of the building. The wall of flags is still there. The building itself is surrounded by guards and has a few concrete construction barricades.

Then another cousin called me around 9 pm or so. I told him to come up so he could see the view from my room, but he said he couldn't. I told him to ask and I could hear the person say no. It is only recently that Cubans can go into tourist hotels at all (the lobby) and they still can't go up into rooms (well, except the prostitutes).

So I came down and we had drinks and talked. Basically, he gave me an earful. He's pissed. He is a butcher, which makes him well liked, and he scores a lot of extra food. He said there was a lot of corruption and he filled me in on details that I won't divulge here—just in case. He has access to the Internet and keeps his family and neighbors informed. He was frustrated about the lack of incentives and is actively looking for a better life.

On Wednesday (December 29), I tried breakfast on the second floor. It was much nicer. Eggs to order, lots of sausages, etc. The 20th floor has the view, but the 2nd has the food.

We went to visit ELAM, an international medical school in the morning. It was a former naval base way west of Havana. It was very nice. The presenter said 48 Americans had trained there. I asked how many practice in the US and she said she didn't know. She described one graduate in NYC who is doing great and won some kind of prize. The education at ELAM is free, but it is impossible to know if it's any good. They accept US students with BAs and high school grads from other countries. Seems dicey. She said the US students were usually very well prepared, but need to learn Spanish. We ran into students and I talked to someone from Zambia who seemed happy and said the education was legit. He was going to do sports medicine. The spokesperson did talk about the STEP exam, but had no hard numbers on performance.

After ELAM, we went back to Old Havana and had lunch at El Patio. It was very good (although our guide kept saying the ropa vieja was too salty). I talked with her and she was very receptive to building a custom tour, although she said there are certain places we couldn't get into, like ICAP (the propaganda center). I said that's fine. I'd like a trip that avoided government as much as possible, although it might be good for students to hear the government's version.

The architecture and plazas (we went to four of five) are really awesome. They reminded me of Madrid. The area is very clean, but not as brightly colored as it must have been at one time. It would be nice to know the dates of construction of the various areas of Old Havana. You could spend days walking around and looking at the buildings.

I went into the church in the Plaza de la Catedral and I talked to this guy there. He was nice and friendly. I told him I wanted to make a donation, but to the church not the government. He assured me it would go directly to the church. I showed him a few 10CUC notes and his eyes opened wide and he told me to put it in the donation box, so I did. I wondered if Rafael ever gave mass here or if Sor Delia or Mirita were ever inside this church.

[My cousin had a small Christmas tree in her living room and she goes to church. She said Escaleras remain devoutly Catholic. There was a giant tree in the lobby of the hotel. After the Pope's visit in the late 90s, Cubans could have trees and this tradition is now popular. The Pope's visit is said to have led to more freedom of religion.]

Next up was an educational sector union leader. Someone asked what happens to bad teachers and she went on and on about evaluations and how some are R (regular) and M (malo) and then those teachers have to do a bunch of stuff. I asked what fraction get R and M? Very few, maybe 2%. It's hard to know if this number is real or if they are serious about teacher quality.

My asking for a number is a running joke in our tour. No one ever has a number. They can't even estimate. I take this as a clear sign of an undeveloped country, although it may also reflect the tight control of information. If the former, it's ironic that a centrally planned economy would not have data. They don't seem to use computers very much here. I asked about the 500,000 people (that's about 10% of the work force) being fired by the government and she said no teachers are being fired and there is actually a need for teachers. By the way, the actual word for those fired is "disponible" or available (and they don't use the word unemployment because there supposedly is none), but some non-teachers in the education sector are being made disponible. The union will make sure all procedures are properly followed. I'm guessing there will be serious maneuvering on who's fired and who stays.

The tour was going to the Museum of the Revolution, but I just knew I couldn't take that so I said I was going to the cemetery. Jennifer joined me. The plan was to take a taxi in Cuban pesos (one of those really old cars), but they run a fixed route and none were going our way. So we ended up walking all the way there. We took a wrong turn and walked up the Jose Miguel Gomez memorial and we also walked in a somewhat sketchy barrio, but Jennifer was happy because she got great shots of street life. We barely made it before it closed and then got a great guide who shared a lot of information about the amazing cemetery and daily life. We did a prayer to some woman who was buried with her baby at her feet and then he was found up at her chest. People pray to her and she grants wishes. There are tons of really nice thank you plaques to her there. The cemetery is the last place where there is private property in Cuba. The owners can buy and sell plots! All kinds of famous and rich people are buried there. The guide had never heard of Julio Lobo (I had asked if any of Lobo's family was there and I'm positive they are), so I promised to send him the *Sugar King of Havana*. He did not want a tip, but I forced a few "kooks" (the Cubans also call the money "chavitos") on him.

[I thought the etymology of chavitos was a humorous reference to Chavez, but Maria, my sister-in-law says she doesn't think so. Guagua is pretty clearly from the fact that Wa & Wa, Inc., was a US company that exported buses to Cuba. Guajiro, a Cuban peasant, is supposedly from "war hero," dating from 1898. My family always said "platanos Johnson" for bananas, but I don't know how widespread that is and I didn't buy a banana to test it.]

We walked all the way back to the hotel in the dark and barely made it before 7 pm. We met Sue and Alissa and went to dinner. We went to Nerei, but it was way too expensive (like 20CUC/person) so we just had drinks and then went to Los Amigos. We waited for a while and talked to locals, then had a good meal. One guy wanted to know how to get out and I told him I didn't know. He thought there was something I could do in the US, but if there is, I have no idea what it is. Earlier, I told our guide and driver the story of Gonzalo, my 80 year old uncle in Camagüey, who Joaquin, his brother in Tampa, is trying to bring to the US and how Gonzalo went to Havana and failed the interview. The US interviewer has to determine if you will permanently stay in the US and denies entry on those grounds. They were shocked and said old people usually have no trouble getting visas (which doesn't make sense to me). Our guide spent a boatload of money, several hundred dollars, trying to take a trip to the US, but she was denied a visa

Today, we started with a trip to Hamel Alley. It's an art project with ties to Afro-Cuban roots. The art was interesting and there were volunteers working on some kind of park.



Then we walked to El Niño and La Niña communitarian project. A group sang for us that I liked and I bought a CD from them. We took a long tour at the Fine Arts Museum and ate a late lunch at the Two Brothers Bar in Old Havana across from the ferry.

We took la lancha (the ferry) across the bay to Regla.



La Regla is a Catholic church with African Santeria influence. The basic story is that St. Augustine was in north Africa writing his code (regla) for Catholic piety when he dreamed of a virgin that he engraved in ebony with black features (because the women around were all black). Then, as he fled across the Straits of Gibraltar, a storm blew in and he prayed to her. He was saved. The original statue is still there (in Spain's southern coast). 700 years later, pilgrims came to Havana harbor safely and thanked la Virgen de Regla. Black slaves then poured in and the church became infused with Santeria. I think I understood that you can pray to a statue of la Virgen on one side of the altar or a statue of the equivalent Santeria goddess on the other side.



We then went to the museum, which had all kinds of Santeria gods and goddesses and two other African religions.

We got back to the hotel around 5 pm and I went shopping at a bookstore. I bought some souvenirs and a framed Wifredo Lam that I saw at the Museo de Bellas Artes. It is called *El Tercer Mundo*. [Later, in Veñales, I bought a lighter with another famous Lam, *La Silla*, on it. His most famous work is *The Jungle*, which is in the MoMA. Lam may be the most renowned Cuban painter.]

[Below is a photo of Jennifer, who was sitting outside the store while I shopped. Her photos of this trip will be spectacular, I'm sure.]



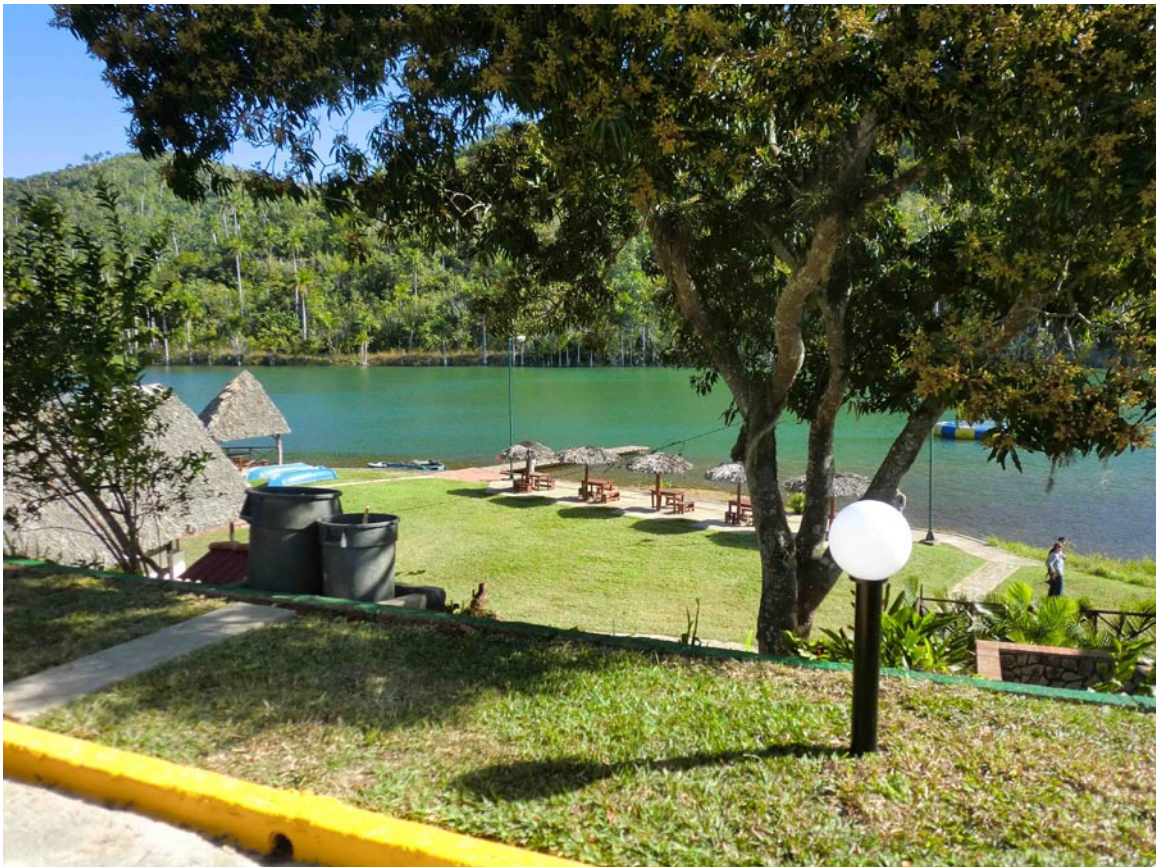
I got in touch with Kyle (my student from DePauw) and we had dinner at La Roca. It was good. He had never had croquetas, ropa vieja, moros, or flan. He is operating on a shoestring: eating carrots for lunch for a few centavos in moneda nacional. There are rooms in people's houses that you can rent. He's paying 30CUC, which is a lot. He seemed to be doing well and his adventures will be wonderful to hear and read about when we are both back at DePauw.



On the way home, a guy from last night that tried to convince me to buy cigars recognized me and made me the same offer. Kyle wanted me to buy them, but I just couldn't. It was 50CUC and they are worth 380CUC legally. I'm willing to risk losing the little bit that I bought, but I would be pissed if US Customs took away expensive cigars.

December 31, 2010, 4pm

I'm on the bus riding to Viñales. Changing money this morning was a pain. The \$20 bills I had were nicked so she wouldn't change them. She told me to go to the bank. We left for Las Terrazas (Hotel Moka on the map). The road outside Havana was in good shape, but practically empty. Las Terrazas was beautiful, but it had a weird, maybe artificial feel to it. They gave us a welcome drink: curujey (coke, fanta, and rum) was very good.



We drove into the town and had a meeting with the doctor. He was into Chinese medicine and natural herbs. I've been noticing things that are different between Cubans and Miami Cubans, but there are more similarities than differences. Food, language, and what I would call "socialness" are at the top of the list, but so is herbal medicine. I asked the doctor about anamu and romerillo and he explained how you use these. I kept thinking about Alvarez Guedes and his romerillo joke, so I had to suppress laughter as I filmed him.

I bought a small print from a local artist. He was a geologist who just picked up painting and now he paints in his living room.



We were supposed to go swimming in the river, but the water was really cold. I just put my feet in it.



Two from our tour joined a couple of French tourists in the water. Chinese tourists were entering as we left. No Cubans use this lovely park. That has been bothering me and I pointed it out to other members of the tour, who agreed it was odd.



We then went to the ruins of a French coffee plantation that was abandoned in 1845 or so.



Haitian émigrés came here fleeing the Haitian revolution and planted coffee on the mountain side. The height of production was in 1821. The guide did not know why it stopped making coffee. Many times during this tour I have wanted to look stuff up, but Internet access is really limited. He explained how slaves lived and how coffee was made, including the stages of production. Lunch at the restaurant (the master's house) was good. The group was asking me what I thought and I was telling them my opinions as evenly as I could. One person said that it's good that I'm open-minded, but I'm not sure I really am. I find myself convinced that there are serious Orwellian undertones on this island and I want to do something about it. It's odd, however, because the presence of the government is not really displayed militaristically. There aren't armed guards everywhere (in fact, I've noticed a conspicuous absence of police and military personnel).

Eric, who has been here before, said that he has had people in the US tell him he was snowed and that it was all an act. I'm expecting that response from Miami Cubans anytime I say something positive because I sense it in myself. I think I understand a little of the deep emotional issues that surround Cuba and the decision to emigrate. I certainly don't like seeing Che and Fidel all over the place, but it doesn't seem to bother others.



I'm guessing many Miami Cubans do not want to hear that Cuba is not a concentration camp. I remember when Rebastiano told me that the Miami Cubans are all crazy about Cuba and I doubted him. I figured that he was just blind to the injustice and oppression. Now I have to decide what I think.

There is no doubt that I would not want to live under this government and especially knowing there's no way I could change it. But there are things I'd like to change in the US that I cannot. There would be plusses to living here because the people are wonderful, but there is material deprivation and you have to put up with a lot of restrictions on information that I take for granted in the US. I'm guessing if you stay neutral you're OK, but true opposition is simply not an option.

On the way to Viñales, our guide showed us her libreta and we had a long conversation over how food is distributed. Basically, every Cuban is given a monthly allotment of food and other goods (such as oil and electricity) at heavily subsidized prices. Our guide let us take photos of some libretas she had kept.

ENTREGAS MES DE OCTUBRE						21	
Arroz	10				Café	3/2	3/2
Granos	3				Cig. Fuerte	3	
					Cig. Suave	1	
Aceite					Tabaco		
Manteca					Fósforos	3	
Azúcar	30	30	30	90	Pasta Dental		
Compota					1 Sal	3	
Cons. Tomate					2		
Jabón Baño					3		
Jabón Lavar					4		
Detergente					5		

If you want more than the monthly allotment, you have to pay “market” prices or buy illegally on the black market. The most expensive things to buy are clothes. There is a huge debate underway on what should be included in the basic basket. In fact, our guide was surprised to find that toiletries (e.g., soap and toothpaste) had just been removed. The list seemed pretty arbitrary to me. I kept thinking that there are thousands of items in an American supermarket and even more in a Walmart and it would be hard to know what exactly are the necessities.

[I found it hard to understand how Cuban participation works. Both my cousin and our guide seemed to believe that they have a real voice. They go to meetings where they discuss things and what people say is actually written down. But how can this information be processed and does it actually make a difference? I can't see how it could, especially on questions that are contradictory—e.g., should everyone or only the poor have a libreta? It seems like voting would be the only way. Voting reminds me of something Fidel said many years ago that most upset my mom, “¿Elecciones? ¿Para que?” That's when you know you've got a straight up dictatorship.]

The drive to Viñales was a nice, smooth highway until just recently. The most striking feature is that it is almost empty. There are long stretches with no cars. Hitchhikers are upset when we drive by and don't pick them up. Our driver took a right before the city of Pinar del Rio and the road quality has really disintegrated. We are going up and up on a winding road. We just saw some schools that have solar panels on them. Now the road is nice again, but very winding as we climb up a mountain. In general, the quality of roads is superb here, way better than the DR, Honduras, or even Costa Rica.

January 1, 2011 4:30 pm

Viñales is incredibly beautiful. The mogotes, which are limestone formations, ring a valley and they are spectacular to look at. They rise out of nowhere, with sheer sides, and have vegetation on them. Los Jazmines Hotel has rooms with balconies that have awesome views of the valley and mogotes.



I walked around before dinner last night and ran into a guajiro. I told him my dad was a guajiro from Camagüey and we talked for a while. He grows his own tobacco and he offered me one, so I took it. I didn't have a lighter, so he gave me his. It has a famous picture of girl on it that I saw in the Museo de Bellas Artes, but I don't remember the name of the artist or the painting.

[Internet to the rescue again. It was Leopoldo Romañach, *La niña de la caña.*]

The guajiro and I chatted for a while about life in Viñales and Cuba. He was really nice and friendly. I decided to buy some cigars from him. They may not be high quality, but authentic as you can get. He grows the plant, dries and ferments the leaves, and literally rolls the cigars himself from the 10% of his crop that he gets to keep. I sure hope Customs let's me keep them.

The sign below at a window of the hotel worries me, but I trust that the cigars I bought are genuine. The cigars were not in a box (just wrapped with a paper) and had no labels, but I am positive he made them. I did not get a price in this store.



When I got back to my room, Eric and Dawn had rum and cokes and most of us sat around for a while talking. At 8 pm, we headed down to the restaurant for New Year's Eve. The buffet was good and I ate way too many chicharrones. Several times I had wanted our guide to tell the tour about the Spanish conquest, but she hadn't. Tonight, I couldn't wait any more and told the story of el indio Hatuey and how he was given a chance to convert before being burned at the stake. The whole point of converting was so he could go to heaven. "Are there Spaniards in heaven?" he asked. "Of course," said the priest. "Then I would rather go to hell," he replied. What a great line. As a kid, I drank Malta Hatuey (with condensed milk, of course). I did not see any images of Hatuey anywhere in Cuba. After dinner, we hung out in Eric and Dawn's room and sat around talking until midnight. Cheers all around!

After breakfast today, we headed off to la finca. We sat in his house and they brought us coffee. El guajiro talked about life on the farm and his family. He answered our questions.

His son gave us a tour of the farm. Our guide is scared of fowl so she did not go and I was the interpreter. He explained the crops they plant (cabbage, tomato, corn) as we walked through the fields. The family has three hectares [~7.5 acres]. He yanked up a yucca and explained that they harvest it as needed because it can stay in the ground for several years.

The tobacco was a month and half old and he said it would now grow very fast, to be harvested chest high in 2 ½ months. Next you ferment the leaves and dry them. Their recipe uses honey and other stuff. He said they always did it the same way. He has to sell 90% of the leaves at fixed price to the state. He did not know the price; he said it depended on quality and total harvest. Cohiba and other high end cigars are made of the best leaves and with a special fermenting recipe in a factory. He showed us how to roll a cigar and gave it to me.

I'm guessing that Abuelo's finca in Redención is pretty similar to this finca. The guajiro's weren't walking inside the house with spurs like Manny Mendez likes to describe, but it was pretty close. They just got electricity a few years ago and an indoor toilet. A pair of hurricanes blew through here in 2008 (Aug and Sep) and destroyed all of the houses. The guajiro built his own house, including the cement floor. The aluminum roof was donated by Venezuela.



Next, we went to the town and walked around a bit. Then we went to the caves. There's a little boat ride through the caves and at the end, I had some guarapo (sugarcane juice).



We had lunch at the Mural of Prehistory restaurant. The pork was excellent. It's on a wood fire.



I was supposed to ride a horse this afternoon, but they cancelled it. It would have been fun to ride through this area. Instead, I will walk it.

January 1, 2011, 6:30 pm

Wow—so I went for a hike and walked down a ways to the valley and then headed back. As I was nearing the hotel, I ran into a guajiro who had some horses and two guys walking off. I introduced myself and he asked me if I wanted to ride. Next thing I know, I'm on a horse riding through the valley in Viñales! The guajiro said life was tough. He complained a lot about pesos and chavitos. He explained his business model. He works for the tour company. They set up rides and he gets 260 pesos in moneda nacional per month, which is trivial, but CUC tips, which is huge. My ride, however, is pure profit. As he said, "I'm not going to lie to you because you would know I'm lying, but there's no way that I report this ride. If someone stops me right now, I have a paper that shows I'm giving someone a ride, the previous people who just finished." And we laughed together because we were able to do something from which we both gained without having the government get a cut.

Things I didn't know: a problem with cradle-to-grave socialism is that the government insinuates itself in every aspect of your life to the point that you fight for little areas where they can't reach you. On a completely different note, I had a conversation with our driver at lunch and he said that abortion is legal and free and no questions asked up to 2 months, and then it's impossible. He thought too many girls were having sex too early, like 12 or 13, and too many women were using abortion as birth control. He was surprised to hear about "don't ask don't tell" and said gays cannot serve in the military (though he agreed there are closet gays in the military). Men have a two-year compulsory commitment, one if you go to the university. One other thing that I did not know that is quite obvious—the last few years have been better for the economy here. The broad arc is this: mostly struggling through 70s and 80s, and then really bad during the "special period" after the collapse of the USSR (lots of Chinese-made bicycles, very thin people), but more cars, buses, and food are available now. Eric said that it is like night and day compared to his last visit six years ago.

By the way, the floor of the valley is beautiful. Animals and crops; people chatting as you pass them by. A young boy was on horseback leading some animals and smoking a cigar and my guajiro guide was kidding him as he went by.

January 2, 2011, 11am

We met as a group for half an hour before dinner to discuss our tour evaluation. Our guide had asked me to write something in a blue book that had evaluations from other tours going back a few years. The number of tours has collapsed the last couple of years. I asked why and she did not know, presumably the financial crisis is global and has really hurt international Caribbean tourism. There is almost no internal Cuban tourism.

Our dinner conversation was fascinating. I kept saying that I was optimistic that Cuba will open up to the US and our guide expressed real fear of Miami Cubans. "They will come here and take our houses." I tried to argue that those folks are dead or old and that is unlikely, but she could not be dissuaded. I have been reminded over and over about the gulf that divides Cubans and Cuban-Americans. I asked her if we are doomed to be like Jews and Palestinians and she said that this situation is different because of the water. As an island, Cuba can protect itself. There is no doubt that the embargo has created a bunker mentality that will be difficult to overcome. The large mutually beneficial gains that are available are too enticing, in my view.

After dinner at the hotel, we went to town and watched a show. It was driving, loud music from a band, and then a solo singer who would grab women from the crowd and sing to them. Sue, from our group was the best. Other audience members were shy, but Sue really hammed it up. It was a lot of fun.

The lead female in the band was, shall we say, portly, and dressed in tight pants. Our driver leaned over to me and said, “Esa esta gordita.” I burst out laughing and translated for everyone to support that what our guide had been saying was right: Cubans will describe what they see plainly and with little diplomacy. They had some scantily clad women dancers and a magician. As we left, I asked our guide how long it would go on and she said they would start salsa soon and go until 3am. It was also interesting that outside, there was a free concert on the square and it was pretty crowded. The best part of this was that we were with Cubans. The other tourist places we’ve been where locals are absent have driven me crazy. It is unfair and the whole dual economy thing is outrageous. There’s no way anyone making pesos can afford anything denominated in CUCs.

[Here’s a photo of Viñales with a morning mist.]



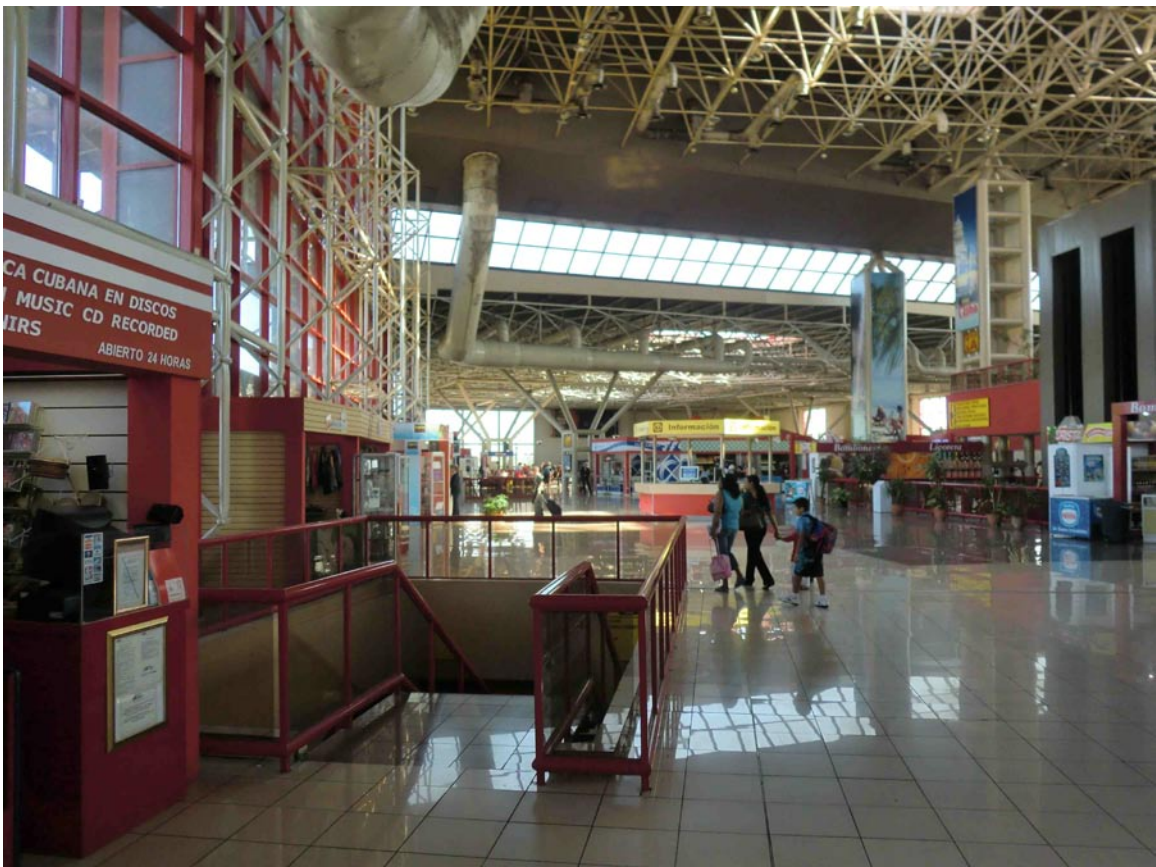
At breakfast today, I asked about Osama bin Laden and our guide said Cubans sympathize with him because he is against the US. She didn’t want to talk about it in the restaurant and said we would discuss it on the bus. I couldn’t tell if she did not want to offend Americans on the tour or if the restaurant was too public a place to have such a conversation. We never did talk about it.

We talked for a while on the two-hour ride back to the airport about politics. Our guide said they voted, but that seemed pretty obviously a farce to me. Winners typically get 97% of the vote. Candidates are not allowed to campaign. She said biographies appear in the paper and likened it to Scandinavia. She said you need not belong to the Communist Party. I asked how many there were in the National Assembly and she said around 600. I asked how many were not communist, but she did not know.

I asked if she had heard of Bernanke or Greenspan and she had not. She did not know where the Central Bank building was or even if it existed. I thought it would make a good tour stop for Econ students. I had to explain what a central bank does.

Our guide liked a movie about 9/11 that purported to show some kind of Bush conspiracy. She said they show this movie every year. I said that usually the simplest explanation is the correct one and that Cubans love conspiracies. She agreed.

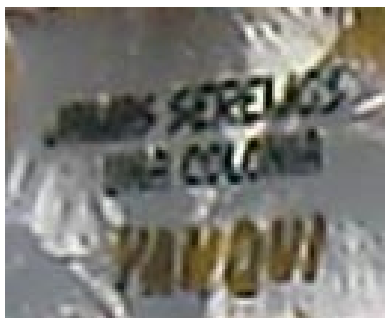
The bus pulled up to Terminal 3 and we got out and said our goodbyes. The terminal is really nice.



Unfortunately, I am sitting in a hard chair in a pretty beat up Terminal 5. It is at the far end of the airport and I think it's a zinger for Miami Cubans.

[I got it wrong. Some flights to Miami leave from the much nicer Terminal 2. I may have read way too much into it. I may be guilty of seeing conspiracy where none exists.]

[The road leading in and out of Terminal 5 has a long white wall painted with provinces and slogans: e.g., we will never be a Yankee colony again. I was taken aback when I saw this on arrival. I filmed it when I went to the other terminal. Here are some of the panels.]



I forgot to ask our guide if she knew about Miami morning radio getting through and tricking Fidel a few years ago. That would have been a good test of how much information they have. Before coming here, I would have said there's no way Cubans could know about this, but now, I'm guessing they do know and simply find it rude or threatening that you would do that. They do not poke fun at Fidel like Cuban-Americans—of course not in public, but neither I think in private. I would not have said this before, but I think most Cubans will be genuinely sad when he dies. I'm sure they were aghast at the Miami Cubans flooding the streets and partying when the (greatly exaggerated) news of Fidel's death came out a few years ago.

When we all got off the bus at the airport and said our goodbyes, I gave our guide and driver their tips that we had all collected and the book where I wrote the tour evaluation that we all signed. I said (in both English and Spanish, for our driver's benefit) that, "I'm going to keep this really simple. When I arrived here, I was scared of Cuba, but I am not scared anymore." I gave our guide a hug and a kiss and she was a little emotional. Our driver and I hugged each other too. He told me that he went to Canada to see his sister a few years ago and really thought about staying, but decided he couldn't abandon his wife and son. We agreed that it is a disgrace that governments force people to make such choices.

So I'm still sitting in the same hard chair at this noisy, crowded terminal. Many Cubans have been looking at me typing on this netbook, but no one has said anything to me. They are here waiting for planes to arrive and they seem to wait for hours. A woman was "trapiando" a while ago and that brought back memories.

3:30pm

Now I'm sitting on the floor in Terminal 2. I was talking to a woman whose granddaughter was heading back to Miami and I realized that there are other flights so I am trying to get on via standby. I finally decided to take a taxi to this terminal because the shuttle was taking too long. This terminal is a zoo. It's much nicer than Terminal 5, but there are a zillion people outside.

The taxi driver was taking a woman home and I tagged along. We talked about life in the US versus here and why people leave. The driver had lived in San Diego and Baltimore. He said he was much poorer here, but happier because there is much less stress. The woman has an adult daughter in Miami, but she doesn't want to leave Cuba.

I have always been impressed by the determination and optimism of emigrants. I cannot imagine how difficult it was for Cubans to leave. My parents came to the United States with six children, ages 2 to 12, with no money and no English. Unbelievable. I'm lucky and thankful that they took that amazing leap. I don't know where they found the courage.

5:15pm

Yay! It was chaotic, but I got a seat on a flight leaving at 5:00pm. Of course, it's now 5:15, so it's unclear exactly when I'll leave, but I can see the plane on the tarmac. It was interesting to see the other travelers with problems and how they were treated. Several were families and somehow the children did not have seats. One lady with lost luggage was upset and filling out a complaint form.

One last detail, my boarding pass has XXX for a seat number. I finally found someone who told me that it's open seating. I think it's going to be a free for all when we board. It doesn't really matter to me because I need to get my bag and that will take a while.

I think that it really is the economy, stupid. People don't care about elections and freedom if their economic lives are improving (see China and Vietnam, for example). I believe, however, that after basic needs are met, attention turns to political freedom. The Internet is a critical part of this process.

January 3, 2011, 11:00am

Conclusion

I did get on the plane yesterday and boarding really was a zoo—whoever thought about merging Southwest's open seating with Cubans should be held accountable. It took a good 30 minutes, after we were all on the plane, for people to settle in. Old ladies insisted on trading seats and the flight attendants had a lot trouble finding English speakers for the emergency exit row (I volunteered early on). I sat next to a high school senior from Hialeah High who goes to Cuba frequently. His biggest complaint in Cuba is that it is boring—none of his electronic gadgets can access the Internet.

It was a great trip. I learned so much and I can't wait to research CUCs, web access, art, and other fascinating aspects of Cuba.

The second we hit the ground, my cell phone came to life and I called Tami. I sailed through passport control: what do you do and do you have family in Cuba were my only questions. I got my suitcase and US Customs didn't even open it! I couldn't help feeling as I headed outside and everyone around me was speaking Spanish that I was still in Cuba.

January 4, 2011, 10:00am

I could go on and on about my family's reactions to my visit, but I'll just mention a couple of things. It was great to see that Jack enjoyed the cigars. He said they were really,

really good. I had lunch with Jorge and Chato, who was a political prisoner in Cuba. He described beatings and how he got involved in opposing Fidel. Chato made clear what I know is true, Cuba is a beautiful place and the people are warm in a group way that I have not sensed in other places, but you cannot challenge the Revolution. For all of my conscious life I have wanted Castro to fall as some sort of karmic justice. After visiting Cuba, I now think that it's not about Castro at all. He is irrelevant. Looking forward, I wish economic success, democracy, and freedom for all Cubans on that island—they deserve it.

